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Public spaces in the making from the perspective of urban anthropology

Public spaces of milan in contemporary era

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Synopsis

Nowadays, with the intensification of urbanization, many cities have being through urban transformations. A large number of urban design projects have mushroomed, not only in the emerging cities of developing countries, but also in the historical cities of developed countries such as Milan. Interestingly, urban design projects that followed the expertise of city planners and architects, who have professionally trained, seem fail to impress citizens. After nearly all styles and genres have experienced the post generation of development and change, it is difficult to judge exactly what is the beauty. There is no uniform standard. Therefore, as a city planner or architect, the master key for urban design projects is not the physical forms of space, but some other factors. Sophisticated experience and lessons are shared among cities worldwide. Indeed, mankind could import and benefit from their common wisdom, such as advanced machines, techniques, management methods, even national mechanism. However, there is one thing that cannot be imported, the custom. It cannot be imported because it is something that marks in people's DNA. The way they think, act and live does not change that easily or rapidly throughout time. It affects how the local use their own places, in anther term, their public life. The notion "non-places" by Marc Auge 20 years ago is already a prefiguration of excessive-globalization scenario. The coupling potentiality of urban design and urban anthropology lies in human's social attributes. Urban public spaces are the containers of people's public life that differs from place to place due to various customs. The research takes its theoretical inspiration from the Actor-network Theory which is an approach that oriented in sociology with the work of Bruno Latour and Michael Serres, and ethnography as methodology to capture the complex and shifting urban environment, attempting to discover a strategy for urban design projects during urban transformation in contemporary era, towards a resilience city.

Key words: Public spaces, urban design, urban anthropology, ethnography, actor-network theory.

Nowadays, with the intensification of urbanization, many cities have been through urban transformations. A large number of urban design projects have mushroomed, not only in the emerging cities of developing countries, but also in the historical cities of developed countries such as Milan. Interestingly, urban design projects that followed the expertise of city planners and architects, who have professionally trained, seem fail to impress citizens. After nearly all styles and genres have experienced the post generation of development and change, it is difficult to judge exactly what is the beauty. There is no uniform standard. Therefore, as a city planner or architect, the master key for urban design projects is not the physical forms of space, but some other factors. So here comes the question: what is the "master key" for urban design? Sophisticated experience and lessons are shared among cities worldwide. Indeed, mankind could import and benefit from their common wisdom, such as advanced machines, techniques, management methods, even national mechanism. However, there is one thing that cannot be imported, the custom. It cannot be imported because it is something that marks in people's DNA. The way they think, act and live does not change that easily or rapidly throughout time. It affects how the local use their own places, in another term, their public life. The notion "non-places" by Marc Augé 20 years ago is already a prefiguration of excessive-global scenario. This research is commenced from the urban anthropology perspective, exploring the influences of individuals, groups, roles, behaviors, interactions, organizations, social structures, social relations, social groups, humanities and social attributes on people's public life in urban space, attempting to open another window for urban planners and architects to manage urban design issues.

The coupling potentiality of urban design and urban anthropology lies in human's social attributes. Urban public spaces are the containers of people's public life that differs from place to place due to various customs. The scenes of different places can be predicted through the following factors. Firstly, the local social structure, for instance population structure, family structure, social organization structure; Secondly, social relations between individuals, individual and group, Individual and country; Thirdly, social groups involving clans, families, neighborhoods, occupational groups, etc. Among those, interpersonal relationship is considered as the main hypothesis for this proposition. The research takes its theoretical inspiration from the Actor-network Theory, which is an approach that oriented in sociology with the work of Bruno Latour and Michael Serres. It reveals that everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationship. As methodology, ethnography is introduced to capture the complex and shifting urban environment. Jan Gehl's observation of human behavior pattern, and interpersonal relationship in life between buildings is an idea reference.

Squares, as a cosmopolitical prototype of urban public spaces is introduced as the research model. The model works as the invariant in the research. Thus the selected squares are basically the same in terms of scale, form and spatial composition. In order to clarify the influence of interpersonal relationship or urban anthropological factors on the urban design, the model is hypothetically placed in different background with various nationality and tradition. To compare the various activities performed by the locals in the same public place, as it is so called multiple

scenarios of “a square” model research. It is a prism that reflects the different appeals of people who play different social roles, as well as the explicit and implicit interaction between individuals, families, friends and other social relationships in urban public space. Two of the imaginary prototypes for the research model have been chosen. One is Piazza Gae Aulenti in Milan, and another is People’s Square in Shanghai. These two share almost the same spatial form, but it is so interesting to find out how differently local people use the same place. For example, in Milan people use the piazza for the outdoor-church activities like weddings, funerals or simply socialization after church, and at night the place is particularly popular with young people who gather here to meet and drink; However, in Shanghai, the square is full of all kinds of activities, there are Tai Chi player, “square dancers”, singing group who are usually senior citizens, man playing chess and poker, shoemakers, dating meeting, etc. The result and comparison of those selected scenarios of “a square” reveal further the issues of the integration of urban squares and urban anthropology. Subsequently, the multiple contradictions in the development of urban square design are clarified. A virtual urban square model is constructed under the constraints of social system.

It is an interdisciplinary research of urban design and urban anthropology, hoping to discover a strategy for urban design projects in contemporary era that adapts the shifting urban environment, towards a resilience city. The research will have an important theoretical significance and broad application prospects for urban transformation and sustainable development.

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Biography

Jingwen Shan. A current Ph.D. candidate in Architectural, Urban and Interior Design Department (Dastu) in Politecnico di Milano, her educational background includes a Bachelor degree in Environmental Art and Design from Jiangnan University in China, a Master of Science in Sustainable Architecture from Politecnico di Milano in Italy and a semester exchange study in Visual Art from California State University, Fullerton in USA.

During her a year and a half Ph.D. research, she participated in ICADCE2017 conference in Russia with dissertation *Urban Hybridization* that was included in the collected papers; CA2RE conference in Denmark with dissertation *Contemporary Urban Spaces, A Topological Analysis Method* that included in the conference proceedings; dissertation folding as an experiment was published in *The Hybrid_Link #05 Waterfront for An Hybrid and Innovative Contemporary Urban Space* (ISSN 2039-4608).